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# Let Them Talk! A Study of Native-Nonnative Interaction in Conversation

**LET THEM TALK!**  
**A STUDY OF NATIVE - NONNATIVE INTERACTION IN CONVERSATION<sup>1</sup>**

**Lloyd Holliday**

In my research study of several stretches of conversation between a native (NS) and nonnative (NNS) speaker of English I wish to explore and report on: 1) the type of NNS errors corrected; 2) the type of NS correction; 3) the type of NS questions used to facilitate the conversation; and 4) the amount and type of foreigner talk. These areas have been pinpointed in the literature, at a theoretical level *viz a viz* acquisition, and empirically with regard to production, as having a direct influence on SLA and possibly the efficacy of ESL teaching.

Before reviewing the problems and issues these areas raise, a presentation of the background and setting of my research may clarify the rationale for this study. This project is intended to create self-awareness of my own practice in order to improve my efficiency and correct what may be the use of inefficient strategies in my interactions with NNSs. I am currently engaged in voluntarily tutoring a graduate student from Beijing, who is here to engage in sociolinguistic research. Currently he attends the English Program for Foreign Students at Penn to improve his English proficiency before engaging in any coursework. When we met, he offered to help me with my Beginners' Chinese in exchange for help with his reading in the field of linguistics. He agreed to my taping our sessions for research purposes. The data used here are the informal conversations that occurred after our reading sessions. They center around the sociolinguistic and syntactic differences between English and Chinese.

Chun, et al. (1982) analyzed conversations between three different groups of NNSs matched with NSs in order to examine the type and frequency of NNS errors the NSs corrected. They hoped to find what type of teacher feedback on errors and what type of ESL teaching is necessary to improve NNS interlanguage, as indicated by NNS behavior. The NNS errors were divided into five categories: 1) fact/truth; 2) discourse; 3) vocabulary; 4) syntax; and 5) omission. The number of NNS errors and NS corrections were recorded and the percentage corrected was calculated. A surprisingly low overall of only 8.9 % NNS errors were corrected, and most of these were corrections of fact, discourse errors or word choice in descending order of frequency. I expected that if our conversation was communicatively effective it should parallel these findings. Moreover, they note that on-record corrections predominate over off-record ones. I thought it useful to determine whether my own practice was similar.

Long and Sato (1983) take this research a step further by comparing NS - NNS conversations inside and outside classrooms, but they restrict their data to questions, frequency of morpheme use and use of present tense for here-and-now orientation. As they point out, questions "offer a NNS interlocutor more speaking opportunities" (270) and "...opportunities to use the target language for communicative purposes [is] probably the minimum requirement for successful classroom SLA" (270). Sadly and almost predictably they find that "the communicative use of the target language makes up only a minor part of typical classroom activities" (280). For the purposes of my study, it is their modification of Kearsley's (1976) categories of question functions I wish to apply to the analysis of the data to examine my facilitation of NNS participation in the conversations. Their question function categories are:

1. echoic----a) comprehension checks, b) clarification requests, and  
c) confirmation checks;
  2. epistemic: a) referential, b) display, c) expressive, d) rhetorical.
- (276)

Chaudron (1983) points out that it is problematic whether linguistic simplicity, as exemplified by foreigner talk, by any means amounts to cognitive simplicity. He compares

examples from lessons directed to NSs and NNSs from this point-of-view with reference to vocabulary, anaphoric reference, questioning, topic development and explanations. As my data consists of conversations and not formal lessons, only the first two categories will be relevant. I wish thus to see to what extent the pressure on me "to ensure communication [may have led] to ambiguous over-simplification or confusingly redundant over-elaboration" (142).

### **Method of Analysis**

Two fairly lengthy conversations between a NS and NNS were transcribed and then coded on a grid system line by line for the categories presented in Tables 1 and 2 (Appendix I), and the percentages calculated from the raw scores. Each error or correction was counted as one instance in a category, including each repetition, excepting where such an utterance was repeated without any alteration in immediate sequence. Such repetitions were regarded as a delaying or reinforcement of learning action on the part of the speaker. All the frequent "ehus", "ums", "yeahs", "okays", were regarded as instances of back-channelling, and not coded, because I don't think they were interrogative. However, as the NS, I have become accustomed to waiting for these from the NNS and may be using the prior pauses then partly as comprehension checks.

### **Discussion of Data Analysis**

#### **1) Type and frequency of NNS errors corrected (see Table 1 in Appendix I).**

I eliminated two of Chun et al.'s (1982) categories--fact and discourse errors--because only one error of fact, if it can be called that, was made in conversation II (discussed later), and because the NNS made no inappropriate discourse moves. It should be added, however, that I direct the topic of discourse very determinedly. (See, for example, in Appendix II Conversation I, lines 147, 173, and 232, and Conversation II, line 127<sup>2</sup>.) Only in I, line 437, and II, line 283 (see Appendix II), do I allow the NNS to direct and change the topic of discourse quite appropriately.

Compared with the findings of Chun et al. the percentages vary, but the order of the relative frequency of type of error corresponds to their findings. Overall thus, from most to least frequent the type of NNS errors were in : 1) syntax, 2) omission, and 3) word choice. And in both sets of data a relatively small number of errors were corrected by the NS: 11.1% in my data; 8.9% in Chun et al.'s data. However, further comparisons between the two sets of data are not relevant or valid.

The most interesting feature of my statistical data is the high frequency of NNS self-corrections, 17.3%, as opposed to the NS corrections 11.1%. Of these self-corrections more were successful, 54.5%, than unsuccessful, 45.5%. And especially noticeable was the change between conversation I and II. Of the number of NNS self-corrections attempted in I, only 8.3% are successful, (i.e. 1.4% of all the NNS errors are successfully self-corrected), whereas in II 80.9% of self-corrections are successfully attempted, (i.e., 13.9% of all NNS errors are successfully self-corrected). There is a corresponding drop in the number of NS corrections attempted from 20.9% in I to only 3.7% in II. It is also interesting to note that ON-RECORD NS corrections predominate throughout, but in I the NNS accepts the corrections, (by repeating them in some way or other immediately after the correction), only 28.6% of the time as opposed to II, where 85.7% of the corrections are accepted by the NNS.

## 2) Type and frequency of questions (see Table 2 in Appendix I)

The overall percentages for the question types show a rough similarity in frequency to the data of Long and Sato (1983) for NS - NNS conversations. Certainly in both sets of data reference questions predominate with confirmation checks coming next in frequency; both of these categories account for the majority of the questions.

The most interesting feature of my data is the increase in reference questions from 32.1% in I to 56.1% in II and a corresponding decrease in confirmation checks from 43.1% to 12.1%. The increased number of comprehension checks can be attributed to two instances in conversation II: one where the comprehension checks are in the form of

assertions, but are really comprehension checks ( See Conversation II, lines 112/116, in Appendix II), and in the second instance because I am asking the NNS to elaborate on his understanding of an English idiom I used.

### 3) The data on foreigner talk

I noted 27 instances of what could possibly be counted as foreigner talk, but this data did not seem very interesting or significant. FT may lead the NS to use ungrammatical English, but these examples could simply be attributable to the normal phenomenon of topic-switching mid-stream in a sentence in spoken conversation. Similarly it was impossible to decide whether to attribute NS omissions to FT or to normal NS conversational practice. The instances of FT may have caused NNS misapprehension or confusion, merely because the extended repetitions they engender could have caused the NNS to lose the thread of the main argument. However, all this is not particularly clear from the data, and hence I don't think I can draw any solid conclusions about the FT in the conversations.

### **General Discussion and Conclusions**

Conversation II, although shorter in duration and containing more errors, seemed to be more natural and beneficial in a learning sense to the NNS. The explanation may be due to 1) improved NNS confidence over the one-and-a-half weeks between recordings, 2) the topic of conversation, and/or 3) a change in the discourse strategies of the NS.

Conversation I was largely about a contrastive aspect of language usage between Chinese and English, and II about how the NNS spends his time studying English and a recounting of his interviews with his academic supervisor. The more technical nature of Conversation I may account for my overwhelmingly dictatorial strategies in that discourse, as opposed to the more interactive nature of the second conversation. Indeed, I became so alarmed at my apparent rudeness when I was transcribing both tapes that I apologetically pointed these out to the NNS, who fortunately laughed and said he had not noticed it. We continue to be good friends.

Transcript I, lines 95-108 encapsulates some of the typical NS strategies which could be responsible for the less productive nature of Conversation I for the NNS:

- 95 NNS:...Chinese..um Chinese to say Chinese to say: "*Zheige ren zai nar?*" must have a...have a context. The context a maybe be somebody tell me..tell er...er...the man went out.  
NS: HM..  
NNS: May be the man..the man..um..  
100: NS: So this in Chinese would point to the particular man. So when you say "*Zheige ren zai nar?*", you mean this man you've just been talking about.  
NNS: Yeah.  
NS: That's what you mean.  
103: NNS: Just talking about the man.  
NS: This man.  
NNS: and just know..I know, I know talk about which man  
NS: Yes.. right. Now, let's go back to...to... there's something I want to get back to on 'this man', but before we do that: "*Neige ren zai narrr?*"

In line 100 the NS breaks into the NNS's sentence, without either assisting him to finish it or allowing him to do so in his own time. What the NS does is to present a summary of the NNS's immediatly prior comments and then asks, using a confirmation check, whether this is what he meant. The question in 102 is not really a reference question. The check is repeated in 104 and the NNS attempts largely ignored as the NS in 108 takes over and steers the discourse. This summary, check, discourse steer strategy of the NS doesn't allow the NNS to be very productive; in fact, it doesn't value the 'talk' of the NNS, but merely uses him as a source of information about his native language. Notice how similarly in I, line 522, the NS is actually very rude and says: "Yes. Oh, I see. Yes, I know. I know you can show me. Now what she talks about in/ this article/ is not new." The reason is that I knew that the NS wanted to criticize the article and tell me more about the origin of Chinese characters, but that wasn't the chief aim of the article, nor was it what interested me at that particular moment, so that I virtually shut him up by trying to tell him what the article was about and ended up by changing the topic of my sentence mid-stream. The NNS's attempt to change the discourse topic was not inappropriate, especially because as a classical Chinese scholar he is very knowledgeable about the etymology of characters; by



lacking on 'is not new' I meant to convince him to stop bothering about the author's simplistic descriptions of this.

An example from Conversation II, 87-100, shows how the NS allows more productive NNS speech:

- 87: NS: Did he look at your examples in Chinese?  
 NNS: Yeah, yeah, he ask me...I say Chinese don't have stress.  
 NS: Right.  
 90: NNS: Ah...well because Chinese language is... a... monosyllables...  
 monosyllabic.  
 NS: UM.  
 NNS: Monosyllabic...er...he at once passed this thing...this question...ask me  
 'abstress' 'abstrict' (laughs) I don't know "abstrict"  
 95: NS: Uh.  
 NNS: Only the abstrict XI was tell me...I don't know...just know  
 'generate', 'general'.  
 NS: But, but English, but...but Chinese does have stress.  
 NNS: Yeah, I think..  
 100: NS: Look like...um...you know words like...very often the second tone in the  
 second syllable of the word...um um...*haishi*...the *shi* is unstressed..

In replying to the NS's reference question, line 87, the NNS says that Chinese doesn't have stress and the NS simply backchannels, so that for the next stretch of speech the NNS can attempt four self-corrections: "monosyllabic" for 'monosyllables'; "question" for 'thing'; "abstrict (abstract)" for 'abstress'; "general" for 'generate'. But the NS breaks in to contradict the assertion that Chinese doesn't have stress (line 98) and displays some of the discourse strategy used so detrimentally in Conversation I by again overriding the NNS's reply in line 99, only eventually in II, 117-123 (see Appendix II) allowing the NNS to explain his point of view concerning the difference in stress between Chinese and English.

It appears, thus, that the more wait-time given to the NNS coupled with back-channelling indicating attention and interest on the part of the NS in what the NNS is saying, the greater the number of successful NNS self-corrections and also acceptances of NS corrections. This change in NS discourse strategy is especially important if we compare the success rate of the NS versus NNS corrections over the two conversations. In Conversation I the NNS successfully self-corrects 1.4% of all his errors as opposed to the 5.7% successfully accepted corrections of all his errors by the NS; whereas in Conversation

II, on the other hand, the NNS successfully self-corrects a high 13.9% of all his errors, as opposed to the 4.9% successfully corrected by the NS. To emphasize the point, there are 7.5% successfully corrected errors in Conversation I, and 18.9% successfully corrected errors in Conversation II, most of which in II are self-corrections (i.e., by the NNS himself). Additionally, although the NS has reduced the number of corrections made from 20.9% to 3.7%, the acceptance rate of these corrections by the NNS increased from only 28.6% in I to 85.7% in II. Thus, there can be no doubt that although in a shorter conversation II almost twice the number of errors were made, due to the fact that the NNS was allowed more scope to talk, the overall correcting strategies show a much improved performance in II on the part of the NNS.

It is problematic to overgeneralize such findings and transfer them to the classroom situation, but my analysis of my own behavior would suggest to me that I should allow more wait-time for self-correction and sentence completion, and allow the NNS to gain more confidence by allowing him/her to do more of the discourse steering. In general I should place more value on the talk as opposed to the information I can receive from the NNS.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for Dr. Pica's "Classroom Discourse and Interaction" course.

<sup>2</sup> In the interest of space we have included in Appendix II only short excerpts from the much longer transcripts of Conversations I and II.

# Appendix I

TABLE 1: TYPE AND FREQUENCY OF NNS ERRORS, SELF CORRECTIONS, AND NS CORRECTIONS

	Conversation I			Conversation II			Total I & II			Data Chun et al.
		Sub. T. %	Gr. T. %		Sub. T. %	Gr. T. %		Sub. T. %	Gr. T. %	
<b>WORD CHOICE:</b>										
No. of NNS errors	16		23.9	24		19.7	40		21.2	28.75
Self-correction tot.	2	12.5		11	45.8		13	32.5		
successful	1	50.0		10	90.9		11	84.6		
unsuccessful	1	50.0		1	9.1		2	15.3		
NS corrections tot.	5	31.3		3	12.5		8	20.0		15.0
On-Record	4	80.0		3	100		7	87.5		
Off-Record	1	20.0		0	0		1	12.5		
NNS Accept NS corr.	2	40.0		3	100		5	62.5		
<b>SYNTAX:</b>										
No. of NNS errors	37		55.2	62		50.8	99		52.4	37.53
Self-correction tot.	8	21.6		8	12.9		16	16.2		
successful	0	0		5	62.5		5	31.3		
unsuccessful	8	100		3	37.5		11	68.8		
NS corrections tot.	8	21.6		2	3.2		10	10.1		7.0
On-record	5	62.5		2	100		7	70.0		
Off-record	3	37.5		0	0		3	30.0		
NNS Accept NS corr.	2	25.0		1	50.0		3	30.0		
<b>OMISSIONS:</b>										
No. of NNS errors	14		20.9	36		29.5	50		26.5	31.91
Self-correction tot.	2	14.3		2	5.6		4	8.0		
successful	0	0		2	100		2	50.0		
unsuccessful	2	100		0	0		2	50.0		
NS corrections tot.	1	7.2		2	5.6		3	6.0		2.5
On-record	1	100		1	50.0		2	66.7		
Off-record	0	0		1	50.0		1	33.4		
NNS Accept NS corr.	0	0		2	100		2	66.7		
<b>TOTAL:</b>										
No. of NNS errors	67			122			189			
Self-correction tot.	12	17.9		21	17.2		33	17.5		
successful	1	8.3	1.4	17	80.9	13.93	18	54.5	9.5	
unsuccessful	11	91.7	16.4	4	19.1	3.2	15	45.5	7.9	
NS corrections tot.	14	20.9		7	5.7		21	11.1		8.9
On-record	10	71.4		6	85.7		16	76.2		
Off-record	4	28.6		1	14.3		5	23.8		
NNS Accept NS corr.	4	28.6	5.7	6	85.7	4.9	10	47.6	5.3	

Note on % Calculations:

- Total of NNS errors in each category calculated as % of overall total no. of errors.
- Self-corrects. and NS corrects. calculated as % of no. of errors in each category.
- Un/successful calculated as % of NNS self-corrects. attempts in each category.
- On/Off-record calculated as % of NS corrects. in each category.
- Additionally, iii) & NNS Accepts corr. calculated as % of total no. of NNS errors, in order to compare the success rate of corrections of NNS versus NS.

# Appendix I continued

TABLE 2: TYPE AND FREQUENCY OF QUESTIONS

Question types:	Conversation I		conversation II		conversations I & II		Long & Sato
	raw score	% of tot.	raw score	% of tot.	raw score	% of tot.	% of tot.
Echoic: 1) Comprehension Check	1	1.9	7	17.1	8	8.5	2.1
2) Clarification Check	8	15.1	3	7.3	11	11.7	3.8
3) Confirmation Check	23	43.4	5	12.1	28	29.8	15.58
Epistemic: 4) Reference	17	32.1	23	56.1	40	42.6	75.56
5) Display	2	3.8	1	2.4	3	3.2	0.15
6) Expressive	1	1.9	0	0	1	1.1	2.6
7) Rhetorical	1	1.9	2	4.9	3	3.2	0.2
Total	53		41		94		

## Appendix II

### Excerpts from Transcripts: Conversations I and II.

(F-NNS; L-NS)

#### Conversation I

Lines 146-7:

F: I think *Zheige ren* and *Neige*.um means Big than English

L: No, what I want to say is when will I..we talk about a man.

Lines 174-5:

F: But a *neige*--

L: But someone you don't know?

Lines 233-237:

L: I see, that's the difference. Now to get back to the (...?) I think I've got quite a bit of that down now. That will be quite interesting. Um. One thing, I..I wanted to correct myself slightly...The the asking where where is..where is that man...where is this man. I can say to you: ..er..you...Where is that man from?

Lines 457-8:

F: Do..Do you...Do you interesting in English and Chinese compounds..

#### Conversation II:

Lines 112-123:

L: Yes So I mean Chinese does make use of stress.

F: Yeah.

L: Does make a contrast.

F: Yeah.

L: Chinese does make a difference in stress and not stress.

F: Yeah, yeah. English can..um..can use stress..can use..change the stress to make a new word..not make a new word..change the meaning.

L: Yes um..

F: Change..the change the meaning from verbal to noun.

L: Yes, doesn't change the meaning, change the function.

F: Change the function, but Chinese doesn't have this.

Lines 127-130:

F: Yeah, yeah.

L: I imagine that is very complicated, but..that aside, I'm more interested to know how you study, how you're going to learn English....

Lines 285-287:

F: Yeah, yeah. Hm..I understand. I understand. I want..don't read book, just listen, you talk, twice, thrice write down. When I don't write down, can't write down, I open the book.

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